Introduction Continuity and Change

Gender, Place, and Skill Formation in Home-based Production

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Home-based sewing and knitting are a type of in-between work – in-between home and workplace, in-between production and reproduction, in-between craft and industry. It takes many shapes and forms. However, despite its constant fluidity there is also stability across time and place. This section contains four papers from four very different settings: Finland and Sweden in the mid-twentieth century, Buenos Aires in the mid-nineteenth century, Greece between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and Turkey in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The four papers illustrate the complex interactions between discourses of gender, domesticity, and production in widely different settings across time and space. They however also emphasize the importance of context, and how a seeming similarity in fact covers very different experiences.

One of the most prominent features common to home-based workers across time and space is the connection between gendered discourses and the organization of production. This connection is clearly illustrated in all four chapters in this section. Gabriela Mitidieri's chapter describes the world of seamstresses in Buenos Aires of the 1850s and 1860s. She shows how this labour was performed through a multitude of labour relations, and how all these labour relations were informed by as well as formed by notions of gender. Leda Papastefanaki's chapter centers around the diffusion of the sewing machine. She shows how technical developments were adapted to fit with prevailing ideals of gender. Commercial advertisements targeted married women, emphasizing that the sewing machine helped them to produce goods for their family efficiently. Such a description made it possible to uphold the breadwinner norm, since no mention was made in the advertisements about how the sewing machine could help in working for the market although it was often also used for paid production by married women. The single breadwinner norm also appears in Laura Ekholm's chapter, which focuses on industrial statistics. She shows how married industrial home workers were registered as housewives in the censuses despite the fact that they did paid work. In Saniye Dedeoğlu's chapter,

gendered discourses are shown to underpin the entire organization of home-based garment production in Turkey.

The place of production is of course at the core of home-based production. Other industries are defined by what they produce, but home-based industries are defined by where they produce it. Mitidieri emphasizes another important aspect when she looks at the question of what is a home. Could it be the institution where you stay temporarily or is it a permanent residence? Asylums and institutions have formed an important venue for paid production throughout history. Workers in such institutions form a specific group that is, more often than other home-based workers, excluded from labour statistics. Mitidieri also discusses how the same type of work can be understood as home work, a domestic task or leisure. These different positions are formed not only by gender but are also inter-related with individual characteristics like class position, age, ethnicity, and functionality.

The chapters in this section also point to another important place of production – the atelier. The atelier forms a special kind of in between, both in terms of labour relationships and definitions. It is often located within or adjacent to someone's home. However, not all atelier workers live there, and there are different kinds of labour relationships within the atelier. Workers in an atelier can, for example, be unpaid kin, paid kin, employed workers, or apprentices learning the occupation. Ateliers form an important part of Dedeoğlu's chapter, but they are also significant in Mitidieri's descriptions of more than 150 years earlier. Atelier workers are also referred to in Ekholm's chapter as they pose a challenge to mainstream industrial statistics in terms of how they are to be counted. In Papastefanaki's chapter, ateliers like the one in fig. 1.1. appear as small business ventures in urban or semi-urban areas of Greece in the interwar period.

Skill formation is an important but understudied part of industrial home-based work. In previous research, industrial home work is often described as unskilled work with low entry-level bars. Two objections may be made to this description. First, feminist scholars have argued that the perception of skill does not always have to do with training or ability to perform a task, but rather is "an ideological category imposed on certain types of work by virtue of the sex and power of the worker performing it".¹ An important point made by all four papers in this section is that although often seen as an unskilled occupation, there are greatly varying levels of skill in home-based production. There are highly skilled home-based workers who make complicated, high-quality

1 Deborah Simonton, *A history of European women's work: 1700 to the present* (London, 1998), pp.76.

FIGURE 1.1 At the workshop of the seamstress Meropi Meraskenti in Kalloni, Lesbos island, c. 1930

SOURCE: CHRISTOS TRAGELLIS, *H KALLONH THS ΛΕΣΒΟΥ ΜΕΣΑ ΑΠΟ ΠΑΛΙΕΣ ΦΩΤΟΓΡΑΦΙΕΣ* (ATHENS, 2009)

garments, and there are workers who mass-produce products requiring less skill, like matchboxes or burlap sacks. Another interesting aspect of home-based work that we learn from the chapters in this section is that there is considerable integration of training within the home-based production system.

We can also see this from a life-cycle perspective, with many of the workers invested in skills that they could use in different capacities and labour relations in the course of their working lives. A seamstress could work as an apprentice in an atelier, as a seamstress in someone else's atelier, as a seamstress on the factory floor, as a seamstress working for an employer but in her own home, as a seamstress sewing for her own family or for others. However, as Papastefanaki shows in the example of working for the market or for pay, which of these capacities are made visible has to do with the context in which they are performed.

When we make long-term comparisons over time and space, it is important to not become deterministic. The experiences of home-based workers in the process of industrialization in Europe is not a road map for home-based workers in other contexts. If anything, home-based work illustrates a process of transformation and re-invention in order to function within the capitalist system. We see this clearly in Papastefanaki's chapter: home-based production

was viewed as an outdated form that would quickly be replaced by factory production. However, with the mass diffusion of sewing machines and small electric engines, we saw the opposite happening. Production moved from the factory floor back into the home, and remains there, as is illustrated by fig. 1.2. These four chapters thus present examples of both continuity and change, the connection with gender, the complex position of paid production in the home within a system that creates a false dichotomy between home and workplace. But they also show how diverse the workers in home-based labour really are, not only in terms of skill, but also the multitude of labour relations that are hidden within the term “home-based workers”.

FIGURE 1.2 Ahmedabad, India: Bhavna Ben Ramesh sews handmade purses out of her home. Her work is essential to her family's income, though women's home-based work often goes unrecognized. Bhavna joined the Self Employed Women's Organization (SEWA), a trade union that works to secure the rights of workers in the informal sector, and Mahila Housing Trust (MHT), a NGO that improves the housing conditions of poor, informally employed women, and received training on how to better market her products and to whom

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